



A Study of Tribal Education: Issues and Challenges, with reference to Purulia District, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

Education is a critical driver of socio-economic development, yet tribal communities in India continue to face systemic barriers to accessing quality education. According to the 2011 Census, tribal populations constitute 8.6% of India's total population, with a literacy rate of 58.96%, significantly below the national average. West Bengal, one of India's tribal-concentrated states, has a tribal population of 5.79%, with Purulia district identified as one of its most educationally and economically backward regions. This paper examines the educational landscape of tribal communities in Purulia, focusing on the core issues and challenges that perpetuate educational underdevelopment. Factors such as poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, geographical isolation, and lack of infrastructural support are explored in detail. The study also evaluates recent governmental initiatives including tribal development policies, scholarships, reservation systems, and institutional reforms aimed at improving tribal education. While these interventions have led to modest improvements in literacy rates, significant gaps remain. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations to enhance educational access, retention, and quality for tribal populations, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive, inclusive, and sustainable educational policies in tribal regions like Purulia.

Keywords: Education, Tribal Education, Literacy rate, Issues and Challenges, Tribal and Backward class, Tribal development.

Introduction

Purulia is the westernmost district of the state of West Bengal, India, forming part of the Chotanagpur Plateau. It is known for its rugged terrain, red soil, and undulating topography, bordered by the states of Jharkhand and Odisha. As of the 2011 Census, the district had a population of approximately 2.93 million, with more than 87% living in rural areas. The district headquarters is located in Purulia town. Purulia is predominantly agrarian, and a significant portion of its population is dependent on agriculture and daily-wage labour. The district has long been identified as one of the economically backward



regions in West Bengal, and it receives special assistance under the Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF).

Geographically, Purulia is part of the “Jungle Mahal” region—an area historically known for tribal habitation and rich forest resources. While the district lags behind in industrial development, it has a rich cultural heritage, especially in folk art and performance traditions like Chhau dance, which is recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage.

Purulia has a significant tribal population, making up approximately 18.5% of the total population. The major tribal communities in the district are:

- Santhals
- Mundas
- Bhumij
- Ho
- Oraon
- Sabar etc.

These tribal communities are concentrated in blocks like Bandwan, Baghmundi, Jhalda, Arsha, Manbazar, and Pancha. The tribal economy is based primarily on subsistence agriculture, forest collection (like Sal leaves and Mahua), livestock rearing, and in some cases, seasonal migration to cities for unskilled labour.

The tribal communities in Purulia district face numerous educational challenges rooted in both systemic and socio-cultural issues. Many tribal villages are located in remote, forested areas with poor infrastructure, making access to schools difficult due to long distances and lack of transportation. Language barriers also hinder learning, as most tribal children grow up speaking languages like Santhali or Kurukh, while formal education is imparted primarily in Bengali, leading to early disengagement and poor comprehension. Additionally, poverty forces many children to drop out of school to support their families through labour or migration. A shortage of trained teachers, inadequate school facilities, and high absenteeism further weaken the quality of education. Cultural factors, such as early marriage and traditional gender roles, disproportionately affect tribal girls, resulting in lower literacy rates and educational attainment. These challenges contribute to a cycle of marginalization and hinder the socio-economic development of the tribal population in the district.

Demographic Profile of Purulia District

According to the 2011 Census of India, Purulia district in West Bengal has a significant tribal population, constituting approximately 18.45% of the total district population, which translates to 540,652 individuals. The predominant tribal communities in the district include the Santhals, Mundas, Bhumij, Ho, Oraon, and Sabar, with the Santhals being the largest group. These communities are primarily concentrated in the rural and forested regions of the district, such as Bandwan, Baghmundi, Jhalda, Arsha, Manbazar, and Pancha. Historically, these areas have been characterized by limited infrastructure, making access to education, healthcare, and other essential services challenging for the tribal populations.

The tribal communities in Purulia predominantly speak languages such as Santhali, Mundari, and Kurukh, while Bengali serves as the medium of instruction in schools. This linguistic disparity poses significant challenges in education, as tribal children often face

difficulties in comprehension and communication, leading to higher dropout rates and lower literacy levels among them.

Despite various governmental and non-governmental initiatives aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of these communities, challenges persist. Issues such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, gender disparity in education, and cultural barriers continue to impede the educational progress of tribal children in Purulia. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including the development of culturally relevant curricula, provision of adequate infrastructure, and community engagement to promote the importance of education among tribal populations.

Literacy Rates and Educational Attainment

The tribal population in Purulia district, constituting approximately **18.45%** of the total population (Census 2011), faces substantial educational challenges. The overall literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Purulia is significantly lower than the district and state averages, reflecting deep-rooted socio-economic and infrastructural inequalities.

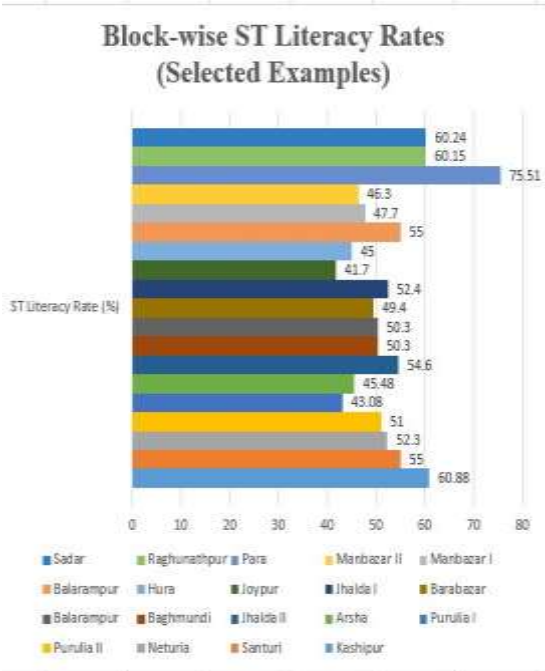
Tribal literacy rates (census 2011)

- **Overall ST Literacy Rate: 53.68%**
 - **Male ST Literacy:** Approx. **64–67%**
 - **Female ST Literacy:** Approx. **40–43%**

This demonstrates a **gender literacy gap** of more than 20 percentage points among the tribal population—indicative of traditional gender roles, early marriage, and lack of support for girls’ education in tribal societies.

Block-wise ST Literacy Rates (Selected Examples)

Block Name	ST Literacy Rate (%)
Kashipur	60.88
Santuri	55
Neturia	52.3
Purulia II	51
Purulia I	43.08
Arsha	45.48
Jhalda II	54.6
Baghmundi	50.3
Balarampur	50.3
Barabazar	49.4
Jhalda I	52.4
Joypur	41.7
Hura	45
Balarampur	55
Manbazar I	47.7
Manbazar II	46.3
Para	75.51
Raghunathpur	60.15
Sadar	60.24



These figures highlight the geographic disparities within the district—blocks with better connectivity and government presence tend to show slightly higher literacy among tribals.

Educational Attainment Patterns

- Most tribal students complete only primary education (Class I–V).
- Dropout rates increase sharply in upper primary (Class VI–VIII) and secondary (Class IX–X) levels due to:
 - Economic necessity (child labor, seasonal migration)
 - Poor transport and school infrastructure
 - Lack of hostel facilities in remote areas
- Very few tribal students reach higher secondary or college level.
 - Exceptions exist due to scholarships and special schemes (e.g., Kanyashree, Eklavya Model Residential Schools).

Challenges in Tribal Education

1. Socio-Cultural Barriers

One of the most significant impediments to tribal education in Purulia district is the presence of deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers, which influence both the access to and the quality of education among tribal communities. These barriers are often more difficult to overcome than infrastructural or economic issues, as they are embedded in community traditions, lifestyles, and perceptions toward formal education.

Most tribal communities in Purulia, such as the Santhals, Mundas, and Oraons, speak indigenous languages like Santhali, Kurukh, or Mundari at home. However, formal education is primarily conducted in Bengali or English, which creates a significant language gap. Tribal children often find it difficult to comprehend lessons, leading to poor academic performance and eventual disinterest in schooling.

Many tribal families follow agrarian and forest-based livelihoods that require the involvement of all family members, including children. During sowing or harvesting seasons, or when collecting forest produce, school attendance often drops, especially in remote villages. Education is sometimes viewed as secondary to practical skills and labor that contribute directly to family income.

In tribal societies, early marriage, particularly of girls, remains a cultural norm. Girls are often withdrawn from school after reaching puberty due to safety concerns, household responsibilities, or social expectations around marriage. This leads to low female literacy rates and limited participation of women in higher education or professional spaces.

In some tribal areas, formal education is seen as a disruptive force that pulls children away from traditional values and community identity. There may be a mistrust of government institutions and a belief that education alienates youth from their culture and roots. This perception lowers community motivation to send children to school regularly. Though tribal communities are distinct from Scheduled Castes, they often face discrimination both within the education system and the broader society. Tribal students may experience neglect or exclusion in mixed schools, discouraging regular attendance and active participation.

There are few visible educational role models within tribal communities, which affects children's aspirations. Without seeing others from their background succeeding through education, tribal children are less likely to view schooling as a pathway to a better future.

2. Infrastructure Deficiencies

Infrastructure deficiencies remain one of the most significant barriers to the advancement of tribal education in India, particularly in remote and underdeveloped districts such as Purulia in West Bengal. The tribal population in this region often resides in geographically isolated villages with limited access to basic amenities, including educational institutions. These infrastructural gaps severely impact school enrolment, regular attendance, learning outcomes, and overall educational attainment among tribal children.

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of school buildings or the presence of poorly constructed, temporary structures that are vulnerable to natural elements. Many schools operate out of single-room facilities with inadequate ventilation, lighting, or safety measures. These conditions not only make it difficult for students to concentrate and learn but also discourage parents from sending their children to school, especially girls.

On the other hand, transportation and accessibility is considered as additional challenges. Many tribal students in Purulia have to walk several kilometres through forests or rough terrain to reach the nearest school. In the absence of reliable transportation or residential schooling facilities, these long and often unsafe journeys become deterrents to continued education, particularly during the monsoon season.

Another major concern is the shortage of trained and motivated teachers willing to work in remote tribal areas. Many schools face frequent teacher absenteeism or have an unfavourable teacher-student ratio. Moreover, there is often a lack of teachers proficient in local tribal dialects, which hinders effective classroom communication and comprehension.

Further, many schools are ill-equipped with basic learning materials, such as textbooks, laboratory equipment, libraries, and digital tools. This severely limits the scope of education and prevents students from gaining essential skills needed for higher education or employment.

Addressing these infrastructure-related challenges is crucial to bridging the educational divide between tribal and non-tribal populations. Investment in physical infrastructure, combined with policy measures that encourage teacher deployment, community participation, and cultural integration, is essential for creating a conducive and inclusive learning environment for tribal children.

3. Language Curriculum & Culture Gaps

One of the critical challenges affecting tribal education in Purulia district of West Bengal is the gap between the language and curriculum used in schools and the linguistic and cultural background of tribal children. This disconnect significantly hampers the learning process, contributing to high dropout rates and poor academic performance among tribal students.

Purulia has a large tribal population, including communities like Santhals, Bhumij, and Mundas, who primarily speak their native dialects or tribal languages at home. However, the medium of instruction in most government and private schools is either Bengali or English, languages that many tribal children are not familiar with when they first enter school. This language barrier creates a communication gap between students and teachers, making it difficult for children to understand lessons, follow instructions, or express themselves.

Moreover, the curriculum prescribed by the state education board does not reflect tribal culture, traditions, or ways of life. The textbooks and learning materials are often urban-

centric and written from a mainstream cultural perspective, making it hard for tribal students to relate to the content. This lack of relevance leads to disengagement and alienation from the school environment, as children fail to see the value of education in the context of their daily lives and community values.

Another issue is the absence of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in the early grades. Research shows that children learn best in their first language, especially in the foundational years. The failure to provide early education in tribal dialects results in poor comprehension and delays in basic literacy and numeracy skills. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the importance of using the mother tongue in primary education, implementation in tribal areas like Purulia remains slow and inadequate.

4. Economic Constraints

In Purulia district of West Bengal, economic hardship is a major barrier to tribal education. Most tribal families depend on agriculture, forest produce, or daily wage labor for survival. These income sources are seasonal and uncertain, leading to widespread poverty.

Due to limited financial resources, many families cannot afford basic school supplies such as uniforms, books, and stationery—even when tuition is free in government schools. This forces many tribal children to drop out or attend irregularly. The situation is worse for girls, who are often kept at home for household work or married off early to reduce financial burden.

Children are also pushed into labour or migrate with their parents for work, disrupting their education. Long distances between home and school, combined with the inability to afford transport, further discourage regular attendance.

Higher education remains out of reach due to costs of tuition, lodging, and travel. As a result, tribal youth miss out on better employment opportunities, continuing the cycle of poverty.

5. Teacher Shortages and Absenteeism

One of the major challenges facing tribal education in Purulia district is the shortage of qualified and committed teachers. Many schools in tribal-dominated areas suffer from **inadequate teacher strength**, resulting in poor teacher-student ratios and limited subject coverage. This is particularly harmful in multi-grade classrooms, where one teacher is often responsible for teaching students of different ages and learning levels.

Teachers posted in remote tribal villages are frequently unwilling to serve long-term, citing poor infrastructure, lack of transport, and difficult living conditions. As a result, teacher absenteeism is widespread, disrupting regular learning and causing serious setbacks in students' academic progress. Frequent transfers and the lack of permanent staff further weaken continuity and accountability in schools.

Moreover, many teachers are not trained in tribal dialects or culturally sensitive teaching methods, which creates a disconnection between the teacher and students. This language barrier makes classroom communication difficult and reduces student engagement.

Addressing this challenge requires urgent measures, such as recruiting local or tribal-language-speaking teachers, offering incentives for rural postings, and improving school infrastructure. Without a stable and motivated teaching force, efforts to improve tribal education in Purulia will remain limited and ineffective.

Government Initiatives:

1. Eklavya Adarsh Residential Schools

The West Bengal government has established Eklavya Adarsh Residential Schools to provide quality education to tribal students. These schools offer free lodging, fooding, and education, aiming to reduce dropout rates and promote higher education among tribal youth.

2. Tribal Hostels

To facilitate access to education for tribal students in remote areas, the government has constructed tribal hostels in various blocks of Purulia. These hostels provide accommodation and support services, enabling students to attend schools and colleges in nearby towns.

3. Kanyashree Prakalpa

The Kanyashree Prakalpa is a state-sponsored scheme that provides financial incentives to unmarried girls to continue their education. In Purulia, this initiative has been instrumental in encouraging tribal families to educate their daughters, as seen in the case of three tribal girls who became the first in their villages to attend college.

4. Tribal Welfare Schemes

The government has implemented various welfare schemes aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities. These include financial assistance for education, healthcare, and housing, as well as programs to promote skill development and employment opportunities.

Non-Governmental Efforts:

1. Pancha Nabadisha Model School

Established by Arup Mukherjee, a Kolkata police constable, the Pancha Nabadisha Model School in Pandui village offers free education, lodging, and food to tribal children, particularly from the Sabar community. The school operates with limited resources and aims to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for marginalized children.

2. Community-Based Initiatives

Local NGOs and community organizations play a crucial role in promoting education among tribal communities. These organizations conduct awareness programs, provide educational materials, and support school infrastructure development to enhance educational outcomes.

Recommendations

1. **Culturally Relevant Curriculum:** Develop and implement curricula that incorporate tribal languages, traditions, and histories to make learning more relatable and engaging for tribal students.
2. **Teacher Training:** Provide specialized training for teachers to address the unique needs of tribal students, including language barriers and cultural sensitivities.
3. **Community Engagement:** Involve tribal communities in the planning and implementation of educational programs to ensure they are culturally appropriate and widely accepted.
4. **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in building and maintaining school infrastructure, including classrooms, sanitation facilities, and learning materials, to create conducive learning environments.

5. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of educational initiatives and make necessary adjustments.

Conclusion:

The study of tribal education in Purulia district reveals deep-rooted challenges that continue to hinder the academic progress of tribal communities. Despite government efforts to improve access and equity, factors such as economic hardship, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, language barriers, and culturally irrelevant curricula have created a system where tribal children struggle to thrive.

In Purulia, where a significant tribal population resides in remote and underdeveloped areas, the lack of basic facilities, poor school accessibility, and low awareness among parents further contribute to low enrolment, high dropout rates, and poor learning outcomes. The disconnection between the language and culture of tribal students and the mainstream education system adds to the exclusion, weakening their interest and participation.

To bridge this gap, a more inclusive and locally grounded approach is needed. This includes mother-tongue-based education, improved infrastructure, community engagement, recruitment of local teachers, and policies tailored to the unique socio-economic realities of tribal families.

Empowering tribal communities through education is not just a developmental goal – it is a matter of social justice. Only by addressing these interconnected challenges can we ensure that tribal children in Purulia receive the quality education they deserve and the opportunities to build a better future.

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